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SUBJECT: GSL continues to mull over response to LTTE's withdrawal from talks, but leans toward restraint

Refs: (A) Ops Center-Colombo 04/23/03 telecon

- (B) Colombo 688, and previous

(U) Classified BY Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons: 1.5 (B, D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Key Ministers Moragoda and Peiris told the Ambassador that the GSL continues to mull over its response to the Tigers' decision to withdraw from the peace talks. The government seems to be leaning toward a restrained, but firm approach at this time. Taking another tack, the president has urged an increase in anti-LTTE security measures. Overall, we think it is positive that there has been no panic, but rather a level-headed feeling that efforts should be made to try to get the process back on track. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) CONVERSATIONS WITH KEY MINISTERS: The Ambassador held separate conversations today (April 23) with Milinda Moragoda and G.L. Peiris, two key ministers working on peace process issues. Moragoda told the Ambassador that the government continued to review how it should react to the April 21 announcement by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that it was withdrawing from the peace talks (see Ref B). Moragoda noted that the view of most of the Cabinet was that the GSL should be restrained in its response, but firm. Current thinking was to have Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe send a letter to the LTTE at some point in the next several days. (Note: Per Ref B, the PM sent a brief letter to the LTTE on April 22, but it was only a placeholder.) This proposed letter would respond to the positive points raised in the LTTE's announcement, Moragoda said. In the meantime, the government -- including key negotiators Moragoda and Peiris -- would continue to engage the Tigers on "technical" issues in an effort to build back trust.

3. (C) In a brief colloquy, Moragoda said the GSL wanted to proceed with planning for the Tokyo donors conference in June, which the LTTE has said it would not attend. Ambassador Wills agreed that this was a sensible approach and something the U.S. supported fully. The Ambassador noted, however, that if there was no change in the LTTE's position on not attending it was possible that some donors might wonder whether holding the conference was worthwhile. Moragoda took this comment on board, but seemed a bit unsettled by the thought.

4. (C) In his comments to the Ambassador, G.L. Peiris took a somewhat softer line than Moragoda, emphasizing that the government needed to review its response to the LTTE's April 21 statement very carefully. The GSL, for example, should consider the LTTE's points that steps need to be taken re the Jaffna "high security zones," the resettlement of the displaced, improving assistance delivery, etc. The Ambassador asked Peiris whether he was being just a bit lenient on the LTTE given its hard-line behavior. Peiris admitted that it was difficult dealing with the group.

5. (C) In line with the views of most observers, if a tad more optimistic, Peiris also underlined what he saw as silver linings in the LTTE statement, including:

-- The peace process has not broken down and the search for a political settlement goes on;

-- The ceasefire still holds;

-- The (joint GSL-LTTE) Sub-Committee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs in the North and the East (SIHRN) is still in operation; and,  
-- The LTTE continues to support and recognize the authority of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM).

6. (C) KUMARATUNGA'S TACK: In contrast to the cool, calculated response of the government (thus far),

President Kumaratunga has seemingly sought to create a crisis atmosphere in the aftermath of the LTTE's announcement. In a blitz, the president's office has announced that she was summoning this-or-that meeting with the military and police chiefs, and convoking the GSL National Security Council to deal with the "any eventuality." The president's Peoples' Alliance (PA) party has also taken the lead in calling for an "emergency" meeting of Parliament to discuss the "crisis."

17. (C/NF) In one April 22 announcement, which received significant local and wire-service coverage, the president's office stated that she had "directed" the military and the police "to reintroduce immediately the security measures that were set up in 1995 to ensure the security and safety of the people." (Note: These security measures have to do with the widespread use of checkpoints and road blocks, as well as other efforts to prevent LTTE infiltration. Many of these measures were lifted in the early days of the peace process.) Re this announcement, Interior Secretary M.N. Junaid told A/RSO that he had sat in on the late April 21 meeting Kumaratunga had had with service chiefs and police officials. He said Kumaratunga had spoke interminably throughout the four-hour meeting on the need to increase security measures. Those present heard her out, but in the end only agreed to continue to monitor and assess the situation, i.e., there was no reintroduction of the measures put in place in 1995. In the meantime, based on what Mission is hearing, there has been no increase in the operational readiness of the Sri Lankan military or police.

18. (C) COMMENT: In the aftermath of the LTTE's announcement, we think it is positive that there is no sense of crisis in Sri Lanka. Instead, per Moragoda's and Peiris' remarks, there is a seemingly level-headed feeling that work needs to be done to try to get the process back on track. The president's somewhat contrived response to the LTTE's withdrawal from the talks seems to be an effort to underscore her long-standing claim that the group simply cannot be trusted. Despite her best efforts, however, most Sri Lankans don't seem to want to up the tension, but to cool things down. Whether the LTTE wants to cooperate in that effort remains unclear. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS